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ABSTRACT

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Anne Haas Dyson

September, 1993

University of California at Berkeley

Carnegie Mellon University

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What difference should sociocultural difference make in early literacy theory and practice? In response to this question, this essay argues that such differences should lead to a reconceptualization that highlights the social nature and cultural meaning of child literacy development. Drawing on a recent ethnographic study of child composing in an urban primary school, the author contrasts dominant assumptions about appropriate developmental practices (i.e., invented spelling, process writing) with *children's* interpretations of those practices, interpretations grounded in children's social and cultural worlds. The author argues that infusing situatedness and culture into the ways in which educators observe and make sense of children's written language should make "normal" a range of possible pathways to literacy—and "appropriate" a range of ways of teaching—so that difference in fact makes less difference in children's school success.

From Invention to Social Action in Early Childhood Literacy: A Reconceptualization through Dialogue about Difference

Anne Haas Dyson
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Theoretical visions of young children, of development, and of literacy have been undergoing tremendous change in recent years. Images of children as inventive but cognitively *egocentric*, stuck in their own world views, so to speak, have been rendered problematic by images of *sociocentric* children negotiating common ground with—or cleverly outwitting—others in familiar territory (Bruner & Haste, 1987; Dunn, 1988). Universal cognitive stages and processes have fractured into domains of knowledge and, further, into cultural responses to problem-solving situations (Rogoff, 1990). Literacy theories have moved from an emphasis on the "cognitive consequences" of literacy learning (Olson, 1977) to an emphasis on the lack of such direct consequences (Scribner & Cole, 1981)—literacy's effects on the individual mind depend on its societal use.

In the midst of all this ungluing of uniform images and common assumptions, it is perhaps inevitable that educational practices built on those images and assumptions are being questioned. That questioning often has as a central theme the sociocultural biases implicit in taken-for-granted practices. In early childhood education, the tension has surfaced primarily in responses to the National Association for the Education of Young Children's *Position Statement on Developmentally Appropriate Practice* (Bredekamp, 1987). That document is consistent with teaching practices associated with "whole language" (e.g., Goodman, 1986) and "process" approaches (e.g., Graves, 1983) to writing in the early grades. All these approaches stress accepting children's invented spellings and valuing their "sense-making" or communicating (and de-emphasizing correctness).

Critiques of these approaches have focused in part on the generic nature of the pedagogical suggestions, which often imply—or directly state—that a certain kind of instructional program will benefit all children "equally irrespective of differences based on culture, race, class, gender, economic status, linguistic background and so on" (O'Loughlin, 1992, p. 1; see also Delpit, 1988; Dyson, 1992; Jipson, 1991).

How should all these differences figure into theory and practice in early childhood and, more particularly, into early literacy? In this essay, I argue that

one means for allowing for differences—for building flexibility into theory and practice—lies in a fundamental shift in our ways of studying children's written language development; this shift would entail a change in the basic unit of analysis, that is, in the ways in which we, as researchers or teachers, frame and package our observations of children. Consistent with broader theoretical directions, within these new units children would be viewed primarily as social actors. Thus, their inventions and communications would be framed by visions of their *social actions* within complex and dynamic situations.

In the first major section to follow, I consider the role of attention to differences in deconstructing common assumptions about how children learn and how teachers should teach. I consider as well the dominant assumptions in early literacy theory and practice, including assumptions about the "right" and the "wrong" way to teach. In the second section, I draw on an ethnographic project in an urban primary school to illustrate how these assumptions might be productively challenged by a shift in ways of studying children, a shift which would acknowledge the complexity of children (and of teachers) as social and cultural beings. In the concluding section, I highlight the implications of this shift for developmental theory and practice.

STATIC DICHOTOMIES AND CRITICAL DIALOGUES

Dichotomies and the Status Quo

"That life is complicated is a fact of great analytic importance," wrote Patricia Williams (1991, p. 10). She was discussing the way in which the language of the legal system avoids complexity through seemingly straightforward and "hypnotically powerful rhetorical truths" (p. 10). In a similar way, the complexities of learning and teaching are reduced to dichotomous lists—not legal or illegal—but "appropriate" or not, "whole" or not.

In the language arts, "appropriate" practice includes, in part, having children "communicate orally and through writing" and "accepting children's invented spelling with minimal reliance on teacher-prescribed spelling lists." Inappropriate practice consists of focusing on isolated skills and in rejecting children's written efforts "if correct spelling and standard English are not used" (Bredekamp, 1987, pp. 70-71).

Such dichotomies can be helpful. There is a need for professional organizations to take stands on behalf of young children and their teachers, particularly given the increasingly narrow academic outcomes demanded of early schooling. Further, in making a point, clarity through the contrast of extremes is helpful.

Nonetheless, illustrative dichotomies are counterproductive if they become the dominant discourse in the field. As deconstructionist theory suggests, fixed oppositions are mutually dependent on each other; that is, a

definition of "appropriate" becomes dependent on a definition of "inappropriate," just as a vision of "whole" language or "process" teaching becomes dependent on the existence of "skills" or "product-centered" teaching. Each definition needs the other as background for its foreground. As a result, positions stagnate. Dichotomous categories "end up always enforcing normative rules" (Scott, 1988, p. 47), that is, the status quo.

This is problematic because, as Cherryholmes (1988) points out, our ways of thinking and talking about educational problems are related to the historical, intellectual, and cultural conditions in which they are formulated. If we do not view them as such, as moments in a dialogue, then they are bound to become the new orthodoxy: "'new' practices will, almost certainly, sooner or later, exhibit contradictions and incompleteness, leading to a new round of analyses and criticism". (p. 97). Practices, pitted against other practices, become static, divorced from ongoing changes in the theoretical, cultural, and political climate, and they eventually come under scrutiny. This scrutiny is what is happening in early childhood literacy and what should happen.

Critical Dialogue through Attention to Difference

In the history of child development and early education, challenges to theory and practice have often come from the study of so-called "different" children—children who are not members of the dominant societal group (i.e., children who are not categorized as white and/or middle class). In at least some cases, these challenges have yielded more complex ways of studying all children. For example, Miller-Jones (1988) has analyzed the contribution of research on African-American children to major paradigm reformulations in child development. She discusses Ginsburg's (1972) influential review of developmental research on poor, primarily African American, children. That review argued against the then prevailing ways of measuring cognitive abilities, which stressed factual knowledge and verbal ability, and it supported Piagetian process-oriented investigations; the Piagetian innovations of the times revealed the underlying universals of cognitive processes, universals often masked in traditional ways of testing. All children, Ginsburg stressed, actively engage in figuring out the world around them, whatever their social circumstance.

Similarly, Miller-Jones argues, the study of differences contributed to the movement away from Piagetian theory. For instance, work on cross-cultural cognition yielded insight into how cognitive processes are organized and used differently within and across cultures and into the role of symbol systems, especially language, in that organization and use (e.g., Scribner & Cole, 1981; Shweder & LeVine, 1984). Moreover, the work of Labov (1969) with African American children provided a particularly powerful illustration of the influence of sociocultural context on children's thinking and language use.

This emphasis on context is felt currently throughout developmental research, which has, in the words of Bruner and Haste (1987), undergone a

"quiet revolution." Children are seen as social beings who, through social life, "acquire a framework for interpreting experience, and learn how to negotiate meaning in a manner congruent with the requirements of the culture": "'Making sense' is a social process; it is an activity that is always situated within a cultural and historical context" (p. 1).

Moreover, this new theoretical emphasis on "making sense" as situated behavior, as *cultural* and *historical* and, I might add, *political* (i.e., fitting into or challenging dominant authorities) provides intellectual tools for deconstructing dichotomies of teaching and learning. On the one hand, this perspective allows us to see teachers as responding to children within context-specific circumstances. Thus, educators who work in vastly different social and cultural circumstances may carry out ostensibly the same particular instructional activities in different ways. On the other hand, from this perspective, children themselves respond to school on the basis of their own interpretations of what's appropriate—of what makes sense—at the moment; thus young children may respond to ostensibly the same educational practices in different ways.

Dichotomies in Early Literacy Theory and Practice

In the literature on early literacy and, more particularly, early writing, there are strong and persistent governing dichotomies: between child invention and child passivity, between holistic processes and fragmented skills. Both these dichotomies arose as responses to traditional practices.

To begin, when research in children's writing began in earnest in the seventies, it was in partial response to images of young children as essentially ignorant about writing. Indeed, young children dictated, copied, and manipulated word cards, but they seldom composed themselves. Influenced by the then prevailing psycholinguistic views of the child as a language acquirer—and consistent with dominant developmental views of the child as a Piagetian scientist—researchers studied early mock writing (Clay, 1975) and spellings "invented" by young children (Read, 1971). They portrayed children as intent on figuring out for themselves how the written system worked. Children's invention of their own spelling was taken by whole language theorists as a major counterpoint to the emphasis of the "skills" theorists on phonics; in Goodman's words (1986, p. 37), "children discover the alphabetic principle when they learn to write." That discovery is reflected in changes in child spelling from initial strings of letters and letter-like forms, to the use of initial and final consonants (BR) to more fully conventional spellings (BAR, BEAR). (For a more flexible view of spelling, see Sulzby, 1985.)

In addition to invention, another major emphasis was on making sense, or *communicating*, through the process of writing (Graves, 1975). Initially process approaches for young children were informed primarily by studies of older students (Emig, 1971) and adults, rather than by any particular developmental paradigm; process pedagogy was a response to a prevailing instructional emphasis on correct written products. More recently, however, a

version of Vygotskian theory has been adopted to explain the kind of teaching and learning that occurs in process classrooms. In this view, teachers use content-focused comments and questions when they "conference" with children about their texts (Sowers, 1985). Children then internalize and learn to ask each other and, eventually, themselves questions that contribute to clear, effective communication.

This latter notion is consistent with Vygotskian theory in that children are learning through routine, interpersonal interaction how to use language as a tool to guide their own thinking and language use. (However, it focuses on facilitating individual learning; in a broader sense, Vygotskian theory is concerned with the sociocultural and historical meaning embodied in adult/child interaction.) The developmental end goal of such instruction is consistent with that of scholars interested in the production of so-called "literate" discourse (e.g., Olson, 1977; Snow, 1983). That is, the developmental outcome is clear communication, with "no gaps in information," and "coherent statements on the same topic" (Graves, 1983, p. 259).

Research on "invented spelling" illustrated that learning to spell was "a matter of knowledge rather than habit" (Read, 1971, p. 34), and studies of children's processes revealed that children could use that knowledge to compose. Many pedagogical texts urge teachers to observe the "natural stages" of individual children's writing, by which they mean changes in encoding (Raines & Canady, 1990, p. 82), and to encourage children to "make sense" through engaging in the writing process, allowing many opportunities for sharing and response.

Critical Dialogue: From Child Invention to Situated Action

The recent theoretical shifts in developmental theory, which portray the child as a kind of social negotiator, suggest a critical response to the notion of written language as simply a kind of Piagetian knowledge or as a neutral sense-making process. From this sociocultural view, written language is a semiotic tool, and learning written language involves learning to manipulate the elements of the written system (e.g., letters, words) in order to manipulate the social world in some way, to take action. As Ferdman (1990) discusses, since literacy involves manipulating symbols which themselves represent cultural meanings (i.e., words), and since the manipulation itself must happen in culturally appropriate ways, the process of becoming literate is also a process of engaging in particular kinds of cultural activities (see also Heath, 1983).

To study this process, educators must examine more than the features of a child's product (e.g., changes in spelling) or of a child's interaction with another in some kind of generic process (e.g., writing conferences). Both invention and communication occur inside some kind of interpretive frame, enacted in a particular social situation. Moreover, development implies that, from the beginning, the end goal is present in some kind of global state that will then be qualitatively transformed (Werner, 1948); thus, the basic unit of

developmental study is a child engaged in the use of the written mediational system to participate in a particular social situation (for a related theoretical discussion, see Wertsch, 1991). As children's relationships with others change—as their frames of reference change—not only over time but across situations, so too should their ways of writing (Dyson, in press). The endpoint of written language teaching and learning should not be "conventional" writing or an "expert" process but the ability to negotiate among contexts, to be socially and politically astute in discourse use.

What Difference Does Difference Make in Our Visions of Children?

How does the infusion of situatedness and of culture figure into the deconstruction of "invented spellings" and "communicative sense"? Certainly one cannot make simplistic assumptions about children's ways of using oral or written language based on their class, ethnicity, or race. It is the existence of such assumptions that seems to have led at least some language and literacy educators to avoid dealing with issues of difference (e.g., Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984).

Further, a "cultural difference" perspective, since it is itself built around a dichotomy (the "normal," the "different") may also feed the status quo, to the extent that the "difference" is stigmatized in some way (Philips, 1983). For example, researchers documenting cultural differences in parent/child interaction about print—particularly differences associated with class and ethnicity—may hope to inform educators' understanding and appreciation of children's adaptability to routines and to what makes sense in communities and families. However, those research findings may be used to explain the school failure of groups of children, children whose parents are viewed as not providing "appropriate" initiation into literacy in the early years (for example, see discussion of Heath's [1983] research in Anderson et al., 1985, p. 23).

Moreover, individuals, including children, are members of different significant groups. For example, there is a culture of peers; children who interact regularly under (and against) the authority of an adult generate values and symbols—a culture (D'Amato, 1993). Further, culture is not a mechanistic or static phenomenon (Rosaldo, 1989). Sometimes teachers and children successfully generate official (teacher-governed) classroom cultures which accommodate cultural differences children bring from their families and communities, and sometimes very small differences escalate into major conflicts (Erickson, 1986).

The concern in this essay is primarily for educators who work in classrooms that serve children from diverse backgrounds. In such classrooms, as in all classrooms, what and how children learn depend upon children's relationships with teacher and peers. What is different in such rooms is *the diversity of potential frames of reference* within which students relate to teacher and peers; as O'Loughlin notes,

> Each student possesses multiple frames of reference with which to construct knowledge by virtue of their ethnic background, race, class, gender, language usage, religious, cultural, and political identities.... The potential for knowledge construction depends very much on how schools react to students' attempts to employ these diverse frameworks for meaning-making. (1992, p. 5)

Moreover, children's written language learning is not only contextualized within teacher/student and peer relationships; part of children's developmental challenge is, in fact, to learn how to manipulate relationships—to achieve particular responses from others—through the use of written language. Thus, to understand what and how children are learning, we as educators have to pay attention to individual children's use of the written system to take action within their own social worlds—to the who, what, where, why, and when of children's language use, including their writing. In Polakow's words (1992, p. 146), we must pay attention to "the small local worlds of our children's dailyness"; these worlds reveal the relationships that define and are defined by children's growing command of a new symbol system.

As I illustrate in the next section, a theoretical stance which emphasizes the social nature and cultural meaning of literacy development would help us avoid simple dichotomies, which infuse certain child actions (e.g., inventing spellings, process writing) with cultural meaning (e.g., "risk taking," "authentic communication") from the adult world, making invisible or unimportant the meanings of those actions in children's worlds. Moreover, such a stance should also make sensible—"normal"—a range of possible pathways to literacy, without, in the words of Maxine Greene (in press), turning some children into the "'other,' rendering [that other] exotic or an object of amazement or compassion."

"THE SMALL LOCAL WORLDS" OF CHILDREN

The Data Set

In a recent study of child writing, I examined the interplay between the social worlds of young children and the world of the official literacy curriculum. The project site was an urban K-3 school, which served both an African-American community of low-income and working class households and an ethnically diverse but primarily European-American community of working- to middle-income households. For two years, I observed in this school, guided by six key children, all African American, who allowed me access to their peers and neighborhood friends.

Details of data collection and analysis are available elsewhere (Dyson, in press). Here, I draw on data collected in a K/1 classroom to illustrate how children infuse official pedagogical practices with complex cultural meaning as they negotiate classroom relationships. Table 1 presents the grade, sex, and

Table 1
Grade, Sex, and Ethnicity of Key Children

Child's Name	Grade	Sex	Ethnicity
Anthony*	K	Male	African American
Brad	1st	Male	European American
Daisy	1st	Female	European American
Ervin	K	Male	African American
Eugenie*	1st	Female	African American
Jameel*	1st	Male	African American
Lamar*	K	Male	African American
Monique	1st	Female	African American
Peter	K	Male	European American
Shawnda	1st	Female	African American
Vera	1st	Female	African American

*Focal children, all of whom were from low income backgrounds.

ethnicity of children who figure significantly in this essay; I highlight the experiences of first grader Eugenie, whose case history was particularly revealing. While children's interpretations of practices no doubt differ in other classrooms with other contextual specifics (i.e., different demographic characteristics, different classroom routines), what is important here is the existence of relational frames of reference beyond the teacher's.

The Role of Writing in Children's Social Worlds

Throughout the world, the years from 5 to 7 are a time when children are expected to learn important cultural knowledge. For children in our society, this knowledge includes the ability to read and write. Blackboards containing "C-A-T" and "D-O-G" are a cultural cliché, as is evident in many cartoons depicting elementary classrooms. Nonetheless, these spellings are not taken for granted by children, who sometimes chant them with evident pride.

In the pedagogical literature, such rote learning is not valued, but child inventing is (e.g., Calkins, 1986). The skilled teacher of the K/1 children, Louise, was knowledgeable about the values and trends in literacy education. Several times each week, Louise and the children did study word patterns; Louise would dictate words for her class to spell. But during the writing period, Louise discouraged asking for spellings; she wanted the children to focus on making sense, not spelling words, and so she asked them to invent. Moreover, when the children gathered on the rug to share the day's writing, Louise encouraged peer comments about literal sense—about unclear or missing information—not about spelling accuracy. And yet, despite Louise's careful structuring of the official school world, the children had their own meanings for spelling and their own reasons for writing, as I illustrate below.

Writing and grade level differentiation. Within the children's peer world, the distinction between being a kindergartner and being a first grader was important, especially to the first graders. As Eugenie told kindergartner Anthony, "we know more than you." Moreover, all children considered flunking—being put with children a year behind—a social embarrassment. For example, near the end of the year, when first-grader Brad, who was struggling with reading, met with a small group of kindergartners to work on word patterns, the other first graders were uniform in their criticism. Jameel expressed his opinion of the matter to the other first graders, as they sat together writing, and they all made affirming nods or comments:

> Jameel: Brad taking kindergarten words! Ah Ah:HA:! Brad gonna lose anyway 'cause he don't even know 'em! He used to be in the class last year and he was the goodest kid. But then this year, he outa here!

Brad did "lose anyway," in Jameel's sense, since he was not promoted to second grade.

As suggested above, writing figured into the K/1 distinction. The first graders generally regarded use of mock letters or seemingly random strings of letters as "kindergarten writing" (Jameel's term), which they could not read. One day Eugenie misinterpreted a new teaching aide's offer to write (i.e., take dictation from) a kindergartner as an offer to her and her friends. She immediately responded, "We don't need help. We first graders.... We not kindergartners no more."

This distinction between kindergarten and first grade writing could become problematic, however. A kindergartner who began the year scribble writing could potentially become a strong invented speller quite quickly, as did Peter. Such a child apparently had knowledge of the alphabetic system "discovered," not through writing, but through other engagements with written language (e.g., being read to, talking with others about letters and words). Given the importance of the distinction between K and 1, a first grader could be very reluctant to engage in what she or he felt was unreadable writing (e.g., strings of known letters); Louise's repeated comment that *she* did not care about spelling correctly did not necessarily carry much weight, as I illustrate below.

Spelling and collegial relationships. Despite their sensitivity to the distinction between K and 1, the focal children, like all observed K-3 children, did not base their friendships on academic achievement. The children's friendships were thus similar to those observed in other classroom studies of historically oppressed minority groups (e.g., D'Amato, 1993; Philips, 1983) and different from observed majority children, whose reported friendship patterns were influenced by perceptions of academic "smartness" (e.g., Rizzo, 1989). To the extent that academic knowledge per se (e.g., knowledge of the alphabet, ability to spell or to add) figured into the children's social lives, it did so in ways consistent with peer group social structure.

For example, children (particularly but not exclusively boys) sometimes jokingly put each other down for inability to spell, but their social goal was a fluid kind of one-up-man-ship, which did not threaten social cohesion; the children did not play such games with friends who were perceived as academically limited (e.g., Ervin, who had cerebral palsy, was so perceived). Further, children who engaged in non-playful academic bragging were reprimanded by other children. For example, Eugenie's tendency to spell loudly at every opportunity irritated Shawnda, who wondered why Eugenie "always hafta open [her] mouth."

In fact, Eugenie was a child who herself greatly valued collegiality, as well as public competence. A dominant feature of her talk during the daily composing time was her expression of sympathy for and social cohesion with others, as in the following exchange with Shawnda:

> Shawnda: Shucks. I erased that whole row [of writing] and I'm doing it over. (Eugenie giggles.) I don't care if it is recess time. I'm gonna do it over and I might do it over 10,000 times. I mean that.
> Eugenie: O::, I know how you feel, *gir::l*! I KNOW, HOW, YOU, FEEL!

In her efforts to establish collegial or socially cohesive relations, Eugenie found spelling a frustrating task, particularly in the opening months of school. She worked laboriously to sound out brief messages to accompany her drawn pictures (e.g., *I* [I] *LI* [like] [to] *P* [play] [with] *U* [you]). She did not spell alphabetically but listened for letter names as she slowly pronounced words. When reading, Eugenie had a good sense of "word-space-word" matching (i.e., that each oral word should be matched with a written one); but since she did not necessarily represent every spoken word in her writing—only those words in which she heard letter names—she frequently became muddled when rereading her work. In the midst of such muddles, she would adopt a needy stance toward Louise and other adults—but *not* toward peers.

In front of her peers, Eugenie used a variety of strategies to spell, including copying available words and relying on her strong visual memory. Indeed, she took advantage of opportunities to help others with their own encoding. In the midst of her own struggles to encode "My house is so pretty" (MHESP), she helped others correctly spell *like*, *me*, and *the*. Sometimes she did so when children did not need help, which they unfailingly told her ("I know").

As the school year progressed, Eugenie did ask friends for help—friends with whom she had collegial relationships (i.e., children whom she could also help), including Monique and Vera. Indeed, Eugenie acknowledged her struggle to the latter child:

> Eugenie and Vera are sitting side-by-side as they compose, helping each other with spellings. Finally, Eugenie asks, "I don't know my words. Do you, Vera?" Vera is apparently too busy trying to figure out a spelling word to answer.

Moreover, when children offered help that she had not solicited, she objected. For example, when Daisy corrected Eugenie's spelling of *was* (*wus*), Eugenie

responded, "I just want you to help me with my words, not spell everything." A few minutes later, she defended her competence and proclaimed her collegiality, offering to let Daisy "copy offa what I wrote."

Collegial relationships were problematic with Shawnda, a peer Eugenie greatly admired, but one who did not treat her as an equal. The more confident Shawnda treated Eugenie in the same helpful way as she did other peers, but she would not allow Eugenie to help her back. Moreover, Shawnda also subtly questioned Eugenie's competence (e.g., by covering up her paper as she wrote so Eugenie couldn't copy her words), behavior which was not lost on Eugenie. Shawnda "gonna act like I don't know my spelling words," said Eugenie one day, as she rolled her eyes at that child in retaliation. At the end of the year, when the children were looking over the work they had done throughout the year, Eugenie came upon a love letter she had written to Shawnda. She commented to Vera, "Oh look. I definitely—I want this about Shawnda. So I can take it home and tear it up."

Over time Eugenie did indeed become a more competent speller. For example, from January to March, Eugenie's spelling of *outside* evolved in the following way: *aT siT, at sid, it sit, itsit, awt sit, out siete.* The spellings reflect both her sensitivity to visual patterns (e.g., the use of known spellings like *at* and *it*, which were part of the children's official word study lessons) and her increasing grasp of orthographic patterns (e.g., her audible efforts to sound out more precisely the vowel sound of *side*). Eugenie *actively* made use of "teacher prescribed" lists, words modeled by collegial others, and her own powers of invention, that is, of orchestrating her knowledge to produce spellings not modeled by others.

Summary: On skills and sense. This brief case description placed a child's ways of beginning to write within the events of her own social worlds, emphasizing the local cultural (peer) meaning of ways of encoding, of seeking help or being helped. In the professional dialogue of our time, Eugenie's valuing of rote learning and copying might easily be dismissed as senseless and limiting. Indeed, current discussions of developmentally appropriate practice, driven by a misleading dichotomy between "sense" and "senseless," and the self-perpetuating dialogue between "fragmented skills" and "authentic communication," have drawn attention away from the way in which we ourselves observe and make sense of children.

ENVISIONING CHILDREN AS SITUATED SENSE-MAKERS: INCORPORATING DIFFERENCE INTO DEVELOPMENTAL THEORY AND PRACTICE

The major themes of the last twenty years of early literacy research are that children "make sense" and that they thereby require "sensible" opportunities to construct (invent) and make communicative use of the written system. In the pedagogical literature, these themes have undergirded the response to ways of teaching seen as "senseless" and "inappropriate."

And yet, the hallmarks of developmentally good practice in early literacy—allowance for child invention and sense-making—are not as straightforward as they might seem. Young children explore the written system and, moreover, orchestrate that system to "make sense," as it were, within particular social situations. As Eugenie's case illustrates, their sense of competence or failure, alienation or acceptance, is influenced—not simply by some generic notion of appropriate practice—but by *their* own interpretations of what's situationally appropriate. And those interpretations come from their personal and social histories as cultural beings, as members of worlds shared with friends, peers, families and neighbors.

To understand these interpretations, we need to reconceptualize our ways of observing and making sense of child literacy. The child is not merely moving (at an individual pace) along a developmental path, discovering written communication. Indeed, written communication is neither a singular kind of knowledge nor a unified process. The child, as a complex social and cultural being, is negotiating the use of literacy as a tool in particular situations with particular others. The overriding developmental end goal is neither conventional spelling nor clear, explicit sense, but the ability to take reflective, informed action through the written medium in diverse contexts.

Thus, we must attend to more than young children's ways of encoding, the overwhelmingly dominant focus of assessment tools for child writing. Building upon the observational traditions of early childhood, we must widen our viewing lens; that is, we must frame our observations of child texts with observations of child social worlds, detailing the situational specifics of children's oral and written language use: With whom do children interact? What topics and genres do they choose, or fail to choose? What responses do they value from—or offer—others? What links exist between children's texts and their in-school relationships and their out-of-school lives?

When we do observe with a wider lens, we will discover the social intelligence of children, their sensitivity to the demands of situations they understand, and the complexity of the cultural resources they may draw upon. Moreover, our discoveries will yield new kinds of flexibility—allowance for differences—in early literacy theory and practice. Below I briefly consider how such allowance might inform two fundamental aspects of early literacy education: invented spelling and communicative sense, each of which has been constrained by narrow developmental paths.

On Difference and Spelling

The dominant developmental vision of child spelling from scribbles through alphabetic invention is rooted in studies of *preschoolers* from middle class homes (Bissex, 1980; Read, 1971). To expect similar behaviors from *all* children, particularly older, more socially sophisticated children who have alternative sources of knowledge, seems problematic. All children in fact must figure out the workings of the alphabetic system; and all children

must start in constrained ways, using minimum amounts of information (a letter, a remembered pattern) and gradually increase the complexity of their efforts. But they do not have to figure out the system in the same ways.

For example, Eugenie had difficulty initially with the alphabetic nature of the system. This initial difficulty might have been highlighted in the name of promoting "natural development," if she had been restricted to the kind of inventing ("sounding it out") most valued in the pedagogical literature. Further, given such a restriction, she would not have been able to take advantage of her considerable resources, including her social skill at getting information and her analytical ability to make use of known patterns (e.g., *it sit*). Perhaps most importantly, Eugenie would have been denied avenues for social participation in what she (and her friends) regarded as face-saving ways.

On Difference and Sense

The developmental path toward written sense, from labels and brief statements to elaborated written communication, also reflects the value middle class educators place on a particular kind of writing goal—the presentation of ideas in explicit, straightforward ways. Such a model ignores the diverse sorts of social work and textual sense children can produce. Moreover, it also denies the situational complexity of writing—and the flexibility of children, their ability to adapt their language to contexts whose sense they understand.

While Eugenie's case history emphasizes the cultural meaning and social use of spelling, it also illustrates that young children's sense-making is not necessarily motivated by the desire to communicate information in straightforward ways. Eugenie was energized by collegiality, a social goal that influenced not only her ways of spelling but also her processes and products—her love letters and collaborative writing style.

To provide a contrast, Eugenie's peer Jameel was not energized primarily by collegiality but by performance. He initially interacted only minimally with peers during writing; he concentrated on preparing songs and verses for the daily sharing time. Drawing on his oral folk resources (i.e., the features of verbal art), Jameel worked to make his words rhyme, his phrases rhythmic, and his dialogue funny. Like Eugenie, however, Jameel was sensitive to appropriate, and inappropriate, help. He *never* accepted advice during sharing time: Performers expect applause—not advice—from their audience (for a full discussion of this point, see Dyson, in press). And also like Eugenie, Jameel valued opportunities to teach others; both children's most explicit, straightforward language came when they were teaching, not when they were performing or collegially interacting.

If our educational aim includes fostering children's social and political intelligence—their ability to manipulate language in astute ways in varied situations—then it does not matter exactly how children enter school literacy. It matters primarily that they enter, using whatever resources they have to begin to manipulate the code, energized by whatever social goals and text

means are sensible to them. And, of course, it matters that, over the years, teachers help children to expand the social situations that made sense to them. Indeed, rather than assuming uniform social structures for teaching writing and uniform sorts of sense, we as educators may need to deliberately plan for child opportunities to engage in diverse sorts of social work (e.g., to perform, to socialize, to teach). (For an excellent discussion of this point, see Gray, 1987.)

On Dialogue about Difference

Through the collective efforts—dialogue—among parents, classroom teachers, and researchers, we can formulate theories about (a) the developmental challenges facing all children (e.g., figuring out the encoding system, learning to manipulate that code for diverse purposes, learning to reflect on the effectiveness and consequences of discourse choices), and (b) the kinds of variation observed in children's ways of meeting these challenges (e.g., the units with which children begin to write, the kinds of social structures sensible to children, the sorts of "help" and "response" possible). Through such dialogue, we might be able to develop visions of learning that are inclusive of diverse pathways—and, also, inclusive of diverse ways of teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1992).

In the end, then, what difference should sociocultural difference make in teaching and learning to read and write? I suggest it should make both more and less difference. It should make *more* difference in that we as educators must not deny children the legitimacy of their own childhoods, their existence in a time and place now alien to us as adults. And we must also not deny children the experiences and resources rooted in their own heritages, even as we resist efforts to compartmentalize individuals, to reduce them to sociocultural labels. If we pay attention to differences, we will find ways to expand our curricula, to negotiate with children "a classroom culture ... that is inclusive, spacious enough to incorporate what children create together—the dynamic social order of their classroom—and what they bring with them from the cultures of home and community" (Genishi, Dyson, & Fassler, in press). And, in doing so, we may find that differences in fact make less difference in the respect young children receive as smart, creative people in the business and social play of learning.

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